RIPON CIVIC SOCIETY

A CRITIQUE ON THE DESIGN OF THE PROPOSED CATHEDRAL ANNEXE

December 2024



This document offers a brief critique of the revised proposals for the creation of a new annexe to Ripon Cathedral. It takes Ripon Civic Society's critique of the Connolly Wellingham scheme as its basis and has been updated to reflect the current proposals by Bowman Riley. The society believe that there are more appropriate locations for a building that will still be able to meet the needs of the Cathedral to provide necessary services and amenities for the congregation, visitors, and staff. The building is designed by Bowman Riley Architects for the Dean and Chapter of Ripon Cathedral. This is not an easy site upon which to design a building, and any criticism contained herein is intended to be constructive.

This report will not comment on the overall size or content of the building except where it impacts upon the design or experience of the building other than to say that the proposed annexe exceeds the floorspace stated as being necessary in the Options Appraisal. This document highlighted a need for an additional 981m^2 / 10,559ft^2, whereas the proposed building has a gross internal area of some 1,087m^2 / 11,703ft^2. This is a very slight reduction of 3.4% on the previous proposal and does not include the area of the covered cloister walkway.

No comment is made in this document on the impact of this building upon neighbouring buildings or structures except where this concerns design, and the society has produced a separate Heritage Impact Assessment to provide an objective counterpoint to the contention in the application documentation that the proposed new building will result in a moderate positive impact to the immediate and wider site.

Location

The proposed annexe is located on the eastern half of Kirkgate Park and partially extends into the former Cathedral stonemason's yard to the north. The Cathedral sits on a high point in the landscape with land falling away towards the river Skell to the south and more gently to the north towards the river Ure. Kirkgate Park consequently has a fall from south to north away from Minster Road and there is a level difference across the site of approximately 1m. The site is heavily treed and surrounded by historic listed walls and buildings on all sides.

General Description

The proposed annexe provides accommodation over two floors within a substantial masonry building and there is a single storey extension to the east against the boundary wall to the Old Deanery on top of which sits a fenced plant enclosure. The building is arranged in three parallel blocks running north to south with the bulk of the publicly accessible accommodation being provided in the two westernmost blocks whilst the third is the single storey section to the east. The whole building sits on a piled concrete deck that is elevated above ground level by approximately 1.25m necessitating a stepped or ramped approach everywhere except into the store to the rear.

The new building is proposed to be constructed using a steel frame with the walls being clad with stone and an arcade of stone clad columns to the west elevation that forms a recessed cloister at ground floor level. This forms a covered entrance with the columns continuing upwards to the parapet. The roof is now predominantly flat although there are two sections of hipped roof above the song school and community / meeting room. Materials now seem to be stone facings below a predominantly flat roof. Internal finishes are not described although the apparent loss of the precast concrete elements is welcome as is the loss of the glulam timber arches.

Externally, a new landscaping scheme is proposed around the remaining trees in Kirkgate Park that links to the north with Minster Gardens North. This wraps around the north of the Georgian Courthouse and extends south back to the new annexe. Several trees are proposed to be removed to accommodate the new building although the veteran beech is now retained along with some others. Given the proximity of some trees to the new building, it is questioned if this is practical or even possible during construction and beyond. A greater section of historic wall to the east of the Courthouse Museum is now retained with demolition restricted to the heavily adapted section in front of the stonemason's yard. This is welcome although it is highly likely that the western boundary wall of the Old Deanery will require rebuilding due to the proximity of the new building. This could and should be avoided.

Site Layout

The public entrance is provided from the covered cloister to the west of the building via a ramped or stepped approach due to the slope of the site and the elevated ground floor of the building. This lack of direct level access from the principal access routes is a shame and there appears no good reason for this – the distance via an accessible route from the Cathedral to the new toilets will be further away than the current toilet block for women and the same distance for men. This raised floor level physically separates the building from Kirkgate Park and prevents access at many points where this could be a benefit such as providing external seating to the refectory.

This covered entrance on the axis of the Consistory door of the Cathedral leads directly north through the new cloister towards now retained eastern gateway to the Courthouse Museum. As no new route to the car park is proposed, this strong axial route seems to lead nowhere. Likewise, a secondary and parallel route through the building has no satisfactory conclusion at either end. Both of these axes seem forced and there are other possible links and foci that could inform a more satisfactory location. Whilst open space is important especially due to the loss of that adjacent to Minster Road, the garden to the north of the building, without the link to the car park, seems cut off from the rest of the wider site so that there could be safeguarding issues associated with this.

On the whole, the building feels much too close to the boundary wall of the Old Deanery which has a degree of charm in its own right and to the Cathedral itself with the entrance into the Old Deanery partially obscured. Moving the building further to the north could solve many issues including providing better protection to the retained trees and allowing level and logical access.

Interior

This document will not comment on the interior layout of the building as presumably the Cathedral are happy with the space planning to meet their needs. However, there are elements such as the positioning of toilets and storerooms that prevent a permeable elevation to the south. Overall, the internal layout seems a compromise from the previous version in order to retain the veteran beech tree in particular.

Exterior

Externally, the structural grid of the stone columns creates a sense of order to the elevations with the reduced extent of the cloistered entrance successfully defining the entrance. The simplified elevational treatment and loss of inappropriate materials is a benefit although the reduced area of pitched roof does create the sense of a flat roofed building. Whilst this lowers the overall height of the building, other than the Cathedral itself, the flat roof is an incongruous addition to this historic setting. If the intention is to lower the overall height, the raising of the ground floor level by 1.25m above ground level is a very odd decision.

Even with the simplified and more appropriate palette of materials, the homogenous treatment of the facades does little to distinguish or respond to differing prospects, sunlight, or site conditions. The black and white line elevations are unconvincing in explaining the building and whilst the artistic impressions are more successful and atmospheric, these are very vague with the trees in particular being unrepresentative of their actual appearance following the proposed crown lifting. Unfortunately, despite the changes, it still feels that the building is not making the most of its location.

The revised documents contain very little detail on how the building will be put together and how the detailing of the building will be resolved. Whereas there was concern over the former proposals, they did at least contain detailed drawings and notes on this aspect that no longer appear to have been considered. Given the now simplified elevational proposals, this detailing becomes even more important to understand the building. As previously, the elevations illustrate an almost brutalist approach to the building design especially with large flat roof which is not considered appropriate in this important setting. The treatment as a whole is unconvincing.

Materiality

The use of stone and zinc (as a lead substitute) is clearly appropriate in this location and materiality is an improvement in these current proposals. Treatment of the balustrading to the level differences is much less so with an apparent utilitarian railing design.

Conclusions

The revised building still does not work well in its location as designed, nor does it relate well to the historic setting or views of the surroundings. Even the functional need to provide toilets as close to the cathedral as possible is worse than the current situation. There has evidently been a further attempt to minimise the extent of land which the building occupies in Kirkgate Park, and whilst the breathing space around the Courthouse Museum is welcome, the annexe still feels squashed to the east. The flat roof, whilst minimising height, results in an incongruous appearance and is completely counteracted by the raised ground floor level.

Irrespective of location, greater consideration is needed as to the relationship of the building to its site. The physical separation as a result of the elevated ground floor creates issues that could easily be avoided in order to maximise views and permeability through what should be a publicly accessible building. If it is the contention that the elevation facing the Cathedral is the 'side' then more should be made of the 'front'.

A two-storey building with a pitched roof, pushed back into the stonemason's yard could work much better perhaps with a single storey enclosed cloistered link along the Old Deanery wall to provide sheltered access from the Cathedral. This would also allow for a meaningful landscaping scheme to Kirkgate Park.

Overall, the current scheme shows some improvement, but the overall concept appears to have been compromised to accommodate the retention of some trees. This is still a missed opportunity to design an outstanding building.

Ripon Civic Society, December 2024